Interview with Bert Seidman

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project Labor Series

BERT SEIDMAN

Interviewed by: James Shea

Initial interview date: September 16, 1994

Q: This is Jim Shea and I am conducting another interview for the Paul A. Wagner Oral History Project of the National Capital Area Trade Union Retirees Club. [By subsequent agreement, this interview will also be shared with the Labor Diplomacy Oral History project sponsored by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training.] Today is September 16, 1994. We are at the National Council of Senior Citizens, and it is a great pleasure to interview my old friend and colleague, Bert Seidman. Good afternoon, Bert. Could you tell us how you got your start in the trade union movement?

SEIDMAN: First, let me say that it is a great pleasure to be interviewed by my old friend and colleague, Jim Shea. We go back together a long, long time, before either of us was very far advanced in our respective careers. But to answer your specific question, I majored in labor economics at the University of Wisconsin in both my undergraduate work starting in my junior year — I was two years at the City College of New York before I went to Wisconsin. — and in graduate work until I got my master's degree in 1941. I never got a Ph.D. When I got my master's degree, I went to Washington to try to get a job in some field related to labor economics, preferably in the Federal Government. I got a job that summer, 1941, in the Bureau of Labor Statistics as a junior economist, and I was eventually

promoted a couple of times. Then in January 1944 I went to a conscientious objectors' camp during the war, and when I got out of there, I went to work for an organization that worked very closely with the labor movement, the Workers' Defense League. I worked there as Assistant National Secretary for a little over a year, and although I admired the work that they were doing — It was with groups like sharecroppers, and it helped in organizing public support for strikes, including the first strikes in the telephone industry, for example. — a lot of the work involved raising money to keep the organization going, and I didn't particularly like that, so I came to the conclusion that what I would like to do is to work in the field of labor economics but for the trade union movement. In the spring of 1948, I spent an Easter weekend [job hunting in Washington, D.C., after] having written to a number of people in advance including Nat Weinberg, who at that time was the Research Director of the U.A.W.; Boris Shishkin, who was the Economist of the AFL; Kermit Eby, who was, I think, the Director of Research and Education at the CIO at that time; and a man whose name I no longer remember, and I can never remember the name of the organization either, but it was the organization that Eli Oliver was associated with, I think, and it was the research arm for the Railroad Brotherhoods.

Q: It was called the Railway Labor Executives Association.

SEIDMAN: No, it wasn't the Railway Labor Executives Association. But I did see somebody at the CIO that weekend, and I can't remember now who it was. It might have been Kermit Eby. Jack Barbash told me that a fellow named Al Belman, who had been with me in Madison, [Wisconsin], in a cooperative house that we were both living in, had been working for Boris Shishkin and was going to go to Germany with his uncle David Saposs, when the Americans were going over [to serve] in the occupation after the war. So, I went to see Boris Shishkin, whom I had met previously, when a group of us went to him — I was involved in a strike in the CO Camp that I was in when the war was over. We came to Washington to get support and went to Boris among others in the Fall of 1946.

Anyway, I had met him before and I applied for the position replacing Al Belman. So I went to these various people to try to get a job, and I went to a person whose name was Anderson. It just came back to me. I can't remember his first name, but his second name was Anderson, I'm pretty sure. Anyway, I went to these people at the CIO and the AFL and the railway organization to try to get a job. That same weekend, my wife of now almost 50 years went with me to Washington. She was a teacher in New York City, and we got engaged that weekend. We got married only a few weeks later, and while we were on our honeymoon, Boris Shishkin sent me a telegram, which I found when we came home from our honeymoon, saying to report on June 1st.

So on June 1, 1948, I became an economist in the Office of the Chief Economist of the AFL. The AFL had two research departments in effects. One was headed by Boris Shishkin and his assistant was a fellow named Peter Henle. The other one was headed by Florence Thorne and her assistant was a women named Margaret Scattergood. A few weeks later a fellow named Lane Kirkland went into the Research Department headed by Florence Thorne, and that is when I first got to know Lane Kirkland.

Q: I didn't realize that Lane had worked for Florence Thorn.

SEIDMAN: Oh, yes. I went to work for the AFL on June 1, 1948, and on June 1, 1948, Boris Shishkin went to work for the European Recovery Program or whatever it was called. Those initials were well known at that time, but now I can't think of them. In any case, Shishkin was gone for [a little more than] the first two years that I worked at the AFL and his office was headed by Peter Henle with overall supervision of both offices by Florence Thorne. One day we all sat down in Florence Thorne's office, and we were assigned fields of activity. I remember that Lane Kirkland was assigned a field that I was very much interested in, because that was what I had studied in Madison at [the University of] Wisconsin, social security. I was assigned minimum wage and housing.

So, that is a long way of answering your question of how I first came to be associated with the trade union movement. Of course my interest in the trade union movement stemmed from my background of being from a very, very early age an active Socialist, first, in the Young People's Socialist League, and later on, in the Socialist Party.

Q: How old were you at that time, Bert?

SEIDMAN: I joined the Young People's Socialist League, I believe, when I was 15.

Q: Were your parents active in the Socialist Party?

SEIDMAN: My father was active in the Socialist Party as a young man, and he actually ran for office as a Socialist. He had gone to law school, although that wasn't what he did during his life, and he ran for Attorney General of the State of New York on the Socialist ticket in some year between 1910 and 1920.

Q: That must have been a very colorful period!

SEIDMAN: Yes. Of course I wasn't born until 1919, so it was before I was born when he did this. Anyway, he always considered himself a Socialist. He voted for Socialist candidates, and he had a passing acquaintanceship with Norman Thomas and so on. So I had a Socialist background in my childhood and early youth, and it was only natural for me for me to join the Young People's Socialist League.

Q: Isn't your name Bertrand Russell Seidman?

SEIDMAN: My name is Bertrand Russell Seidman. My father greatly admired Russell when he opposed World War One, and so he named me after him.

Q: Was your mother also an active Socialist?

SEIDMAN: She wasn't an active Socialist, but she considered herself a Socialist too. I'm sure she voted Socialist.

Q: Getting back to [your employment with] the AFL, you were [first] assigned housing and minimum wage.

SEIDMAN: Well, [let me tell you about] the first thing that I was assigned, and it's a story that I always like to tell. Our department, the Chief Economist's Department, put out something called, “The Research Report,” which was a four page monthly bulletin that dealt with collective bargaining issues and developments in the National Labor Relations Board and things of that kind. Peter Henle asked me to take charge of that publication, which I did as one of the first things that I did. There is now in Washington a printing firm called “Kelly.” Its predecessor once removed was an outfit called “Ransdell.” They did all the printing work at that time for the AFL. I worked with a guy at Ransdell who handled this particular account, Stan something or other. I can't remember his second name now. He gave me the galleys, and then he gave me page proofs, and in crayon on the bottom of it was the union bug. The first issue that I had anything to do with came out, and he sent me ten copies, and I looked at them, and low and behold — Of course this was a union firm. The AFL wouldn't deal with any firm that wasn't union. — there was no union bug. I thought to myself, “Well, you have had a brief but interesting career in the labor movement for two months!” I imagined that this was an unforgivable offense, and that they would show me the door. I called Stan up at Ransdell, and I said, “You have got to stop the press. There is no union bug on this publication.” He said, “What?” And he looked, and he said, “Oh, my God. There isn't! But they have all gone out.” We didn't get a single complaint, and the only thing I can assume is that nobody read the thing. So work on that publication was one thing that I did for quite a few years.

Then Boris Shishkin was the Secretary of the Housing Committee of the AFL, and a man named Harry C. Bates, the President of the Bricklayers Union at that time, was the Chairman. He was [also] a Vice President of the AFL, a member of the AFL Executive

Council, and a very prominent member of the labor movement. We worked very closely with an organization called the National Housing Conference, headed by a man named Lee Johnson. I arrived in time for the final showdown on the Housing Act of 1949, which laid down the principle that every American is entitled to a decent home in a decent community at an affordable price or some such slogan. I worked hard on that for the AFL, and I remember going up [to Congress] with President Green on a very hot day not very long after I got to the AFL, when he testified in favor of that legislation. The main feature of it was that it provided for over a million units of low rent public housing. I continued to work on housing, serving in effect as the Secretary of the Housing Committee until Shishkin returned, and then even after that I did most of the work on housing. He was doing other things. I worked on successor legislation that we supported with the what we now call a “coalition,” but in those days it was just an organization called “The National Housing Conference.” The Housing Act of 1949 was enacted in 1949.

When I went overseas in 1962, the National Housing Conference — I had been on the Board of the National Housing Conference, and I think I was an officer for many years. — the National Housing Conference had a big reception for me. The head of the Housing and Home Finance Agency, which was the equivalent of HUD now, was there and [they gave me] a big sendoff and so on. So housing was a very, very important part of my life.

My counterpart in the CIO until the merger was a fellow named Leo Goodman, who was a very energetic guy. I think he came out of the Auto Workers, but anyway Walter Reuther was Harry Bates' opposite number in the CIO. Reuther was the Chair of the CIO Committee for many years, and sometimes we were on opposite sides of issues, which I no longer remember. Most of the time we were on the same side, but on the whole I enjoyed working with him, and we got along together reasonably well. So housing was a very big part of what I did at the AFL.

Then I worked on the minimum wage. That involved working for the 40 cent minimum wage and the 75 cent minimum wage and so on and so forth through the years, as well as

administering the labor end of a program that involved tripartite committees in Puerto Rico including people both from Puerto Rico and from the mainland [representing] government, employer and labor. I myself participated in quite a number of those tripartite committees, an average of roughly one a year. That took up a good deal of time. I went to Puerto Rico for two or three weeks a year in connection with that program.

I also administered our end of the Walsh-Healy Program, and that tended to be somewhat legalistic. It involved participating in hearings with what we now call “administrative law judges.” I forget what they used to be called in those days, [but it was] something else. Anyway, I would work with the internationals that had a concern with respect to a particular industry they were dealing with. The Walsh-Healy Act required that the employers pay the prevailing wage, and it was a question of determining what the prevailing wage was. So I worked on that for a good many years as well.

Then in 1954 Boris Shishkin became very, very ill with spinal meningitis, and 1954 was the year that the United States acceded to the GATT, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, a subject about which I knew absolutely nothing. A very, very sharp pro-labor guy named Phil Arnow was in charge of this for the Labor Department. Peter Heale and Boris Shishkin decided — We went over to Boris Shishkin's house. He couldn't go to the office, because of his illness, but we consulted with him when we had to. He decided that I was the one who would have to testify before the Delegation that would go to Geneva for the U.S. accession to the GATT and to state what labor's interest was in all this. So I went down to the Labor Department and during a morning Arnow coached me on the issues and which of them would probably be of concern to labor, and I wrote testimony which I presented to that delegation. Not too long after that, while the official government delegation was in Geneva negotiating the accession, they decided to set up an advisory committee to go over to Geneva. I was [named] the labor representative and the others were people like the head of the Bank of America and the head of the American Farm Bureau Federation and somebody else, whom I don't remember now. Anyway there were four of us, and we went to see President Eisenhower and Secretary [of State] Dulles

before we went over. We went over there and were there for two weeks or something like that. It didn't seem to me that we were playing a very important role, but that was my introduction to international assignments. That took place in 1954, so it was before the merger of the AFL and the CIO. Well, I have been running on for a long time. Maybe it would be better if you would ask me a question.

Q: Bert, [what were] some of your impressions of people like President Green?

SEIDMAN: President Green was a person who really didn't make much of an impression. He seemed to be a very pedestrian person. He wasn't a particularly exciting speaker. He seemed to have a fairly pedestrian view as to what his own responsibilities were. During the years that I was in the AFL. . . there weren't that many years [during which Green served as President]. We are talking about a period from 1948 to 1952. But long before I came to the AFL, beginning back in the late 1920s or the early 1930s, Boris Shishkin was the principal public spokesman for the AFL, not really William Green. He went on all what we now call “talk shows” and testified before the important committees in Congress on matters that related to major policy issues for the AFL and represented the AFL in the Foreign Policy Association and other important organizations. To a very great extent, he was the spokesman for the AFL, because William Green just didn't play that role.

The other thing about Green was that he was probably personally rather conservative although he supported positions that Shishkin took on issues like housing and minimum wage and social insurance and racial discrimination and so on and so forth. So the AFL during those years, contrary to what a lot of people thought, never had really conservative positions. By and large the AFL supported the liberal position and supported the Democratic Party. Kirkland, as soon as he got to the AFL, took leave to be the speech writer for Alben Barkley, the [Democratic Party's] candidate for Vice President in 1948 along with Harry Truman.

Another way that I personally experienced this was that, and I cannot remember the circumstances, but in any case, there was a man named Dick Gray, who was a Republican and was from the Bricklayers [Union] and who was President of the Building and Construction Trades Department of the AFL for a while. For some reason Harry Bates was sick or something, and Gray became either the actual or de facto Chairman of the Housing Committee. I remember going to him and saying, “Well, now, in this testimony we are going to say such and such,” which was strongly supportive of the liberal housing position. Gray would turn to me and he say, “Well, what would Harry say about this?” I would say, “Oh, I'm sure Harry would support this,” and Dick Gray would say, “Well, if Harry would support it, I'll support it too.” In other words, he recognized that even though he personally was a conservative and a Republican, the AFL had a generally liberal position, and he was going to support it. He wasn't going to kick over the traces.

Q: Was Nelson Cruikshank there at that time?

SEIDMAN: Nelson Cruikshank was there except for a period when he succeeded Boris Shishkin in the Paris Office of the ERP (European Recovery Program) representing the AFL. There was also a CIO representative. I think it was called ECA at the time.

Q: European Cooperation Agency.

SEIDMAN: I think that's what it was called. Anyway, Cruikshank succeeded Shishkin. So except for that period, Nelson Cruikshank was the Director of Social Insurance, and I suppose was in that position when I arrived at the AFL. Then when he went overseas, Boris Shishkin took over that function, and I worked on that to some extent with him. By that time of course Shishkin was back, because Cruikshank had gone over to replace him, and so for a short time I worked in that field.

The other thing about William Green was that he was the President [of the AFL] and George Meany was the Secretary-Treasurer, and it was well known in the AFL building

that there was no love lost between William Green and George Meany. George Meany was really contemptuous of William Green, and this was also [the case] between their respective secretaries, a woman named Ford — I can't remember what her first name was. — Miss Ford, who was Green's secretary, and Virginia Tehas, who was Meany's secretary.

Q: Then there was also Florence Thorne.

SEIDMAN: Florence Thorne was associated with Green, and she and Meany never got along together at all. As soon as Green died, Meany in effect got rid of Florence Thorne.

Q: Do you recall Margaret Scattergood?

SEIDMAN: Margaret Scattergood worked with Florence Thorne, and I regarded both of them as being very, very conservative, much more conservative than the official positions of the AFL at that time. I didn't really like them much at that time either, but I got to like them in their later years. They lived together, and my wife Annabel and I, in their later years, went to visit them at their home. They invited us for dinner. On some of those occasions Peter Henle and his wife would be there. We never had a very warm feeling, especially toward Florence Thorne, but we got to know her quite well, and to have a much closer feeling in later years long after she had retired. There was one saving grace as far as Margaret Scattergood was concerned. She was a Quaker, and came from Iowa, I believe, and was very much interested in the cooperative movement. My wife and I were also very much interested in it and were very active participants in the Washington area in the cooperative movement and to some extent, I also [was active] on the national level, because the AFL supported the cooperative movement, although not in any very vigorous way. So that made us closer to Margaret than to Florence.

Q: Yes, I recall very well that Florence Thorne was a very, very conservative person, and it was said that she worked with Samuel Gompers in [writing] his [book], Seventy Years of Life and Labor.

SEIDMAN: She wrote Seventy Years of Life and Labor. She didn't just work with him on it. She wrote it.

Q: She had been hired by Gompers when she was a student at the University of. . .

SEIDMAN: And she hired Lane Kirkland.

Q: That was Florence Thorne?

SEIDMAN: Yes, she hired Lane Kirkland, because she had some association with Georgetown.

Q: That's right. She had some association with a professor of political science at Georgetown.

SEIDMAN: I forget who it was.

Q: His name was Charles Kraus.

SEIDMAN: In any case she had this association with Georgetown and she hired Lane Kirkland from Georgetown. Did she hire you?

Q: I came on [board at the AFL-CIO] the same way, [and so did] Lennie Sandman.

SEIDMAN: Lennie was also from Georgetown.

Q: I came on through another professor who was close to Kraus, a fellow by the name of Morton Royce. When did you first meet George Meany?

SEIDMAN: It must have been soon after I came to the AFL. I don't remember when I first met George Meany. I couldn't tell you. I couldn't tell you when I first met William Green either for that matter. From those early days I remember two occasions both relating to testimony [before Congress] that stick out in my mind, one related to Green and the other to Meany. The one relating to Green I have already mentioned, that was sitting with him when he [gave] testimony that I had written, or at least I had gotten our friends in the housing movement to write it. (Telephone interruption.)

Q: Go ahead.

SEIDMAN: So I already mentioned going up [to Congress] with Green in 1948 right after I got to the AFL. The thing that I remember about Meany is that we wrote testimony after he became President and Bill Schnitzler was the Secretary-Treasurer. I remember sitting in Meany's office with a group getting ready to prepare the testimony and each of us getting assignments as to which part of it we were going to write. The legislation was to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act. I am pretty sure that the section that I wrote was on the secondary boycott (Section 7A), and we talked about what questions he was likely get and so on. I think that by that time Andy Biemiller was not the Legislative Director, but he was on the legislative staff, and I think he was involved in that session [with Meany].

Q: I remember Bill Hutchings.

SEIDMAN: Hutchings was the head of the Legislative Department. He was very conservative. He came from the Canal Zone Metal Trades. He had contempt for Shishkin and Cruikshank and all the intellectuals who worked at the AFL, and that contempt was reciprocated by those people. Anyway, he used to talk about “Crankshaft.” You know calling Cruikshank Crankshaft and I don't remember what else. He was very much opposed to the developing anti-discrimination policy in the AFL. He of course didn't influence the policy, and I didn't know enough about how the Legislative Department

worked at that time to have a very clear idea of exactly how he operated in terms of lobbying on the Hill.

Q: He had a fellow [working with him] by the name of George Reilly.

SEIDMAN: Oh, yes, George Reilly and Walter Mason, and he had Lou [Hines]. Well, he had one other guy and I can't think of his name at the moment, but I remember going up and testifying with him on FEPC legislation. I had written that testimony. That was another thing. When Boris wasn't around and so on, I got into that field as well in the AFL. I never was into that field in any appreciable extent after that, but I was during the AFL period.

Q: Yes, I thought that George Reilly and Walter Mason were fairly liberal guys. I might be mistaken.

SEIDMAN: I think Mason was more liberal than Reilly, but there was another guy whose name I can't think of at the moment. Anyway, they had a job to do, and they knew what the policy was, and their job was up on the Hill to try to get the legislation we wanted. In those days we worked with all the organizations that we would now call “coalitions.” I can't remember when we got into these organizations, because I didn't personally work in them, except in the housing field. But there was the Committee for the Nation's Health, for example, and the various organizations in those years that related to civil rights. We worked with all of them.

Q: Where were you, Bert, at the time of the merger?

SEIDMAN: At the time of the merger, I was in Washington in the AFL in what was still called the Chief Economist's Office, I guess, in Shishkin's office, but Peter Henle [was acting chief]. Shishkin was sick that whole year the merger was developing, and Peter Henle was in charge of that office for Shishkin, and I was working on all these kind of things that I have previously mentioned. It was the period that preceded the merger. Perhaps two or three years before the merger, there was something called the “United

Labor Policy Committee," (ULPC) staffed for the AFL by Peter Henle and for the CIO by Everett Kassalow. The Machinists [Union] were in neither organization at that time, and a man named Al Hayes, who was the President of the Machinists, chaired the ULPC. It was composed of union presidents — I think they were all union presidents — from the two organizations, the AFL and the CIO and I suppose — I don't remember. — the railroad brotherhoods and of course the Machinists. They developed policy with respect to the War Labor Board. . . Not the War Labor Board, but whatever [the successor body] was called during the Korean War [Wage Stabilization Board]. I worked with Peter Henle on that, and also I remember that we had to do a major document to be presented to that board headed by. . . Who would it have been in those days? [George] Taylor? I can't remember..

Q: Are you talking about Myron Taylor?

SEIDMAN: No, I am talking about the Taylor who had been a principal member of but not the Chairman of the War Labor Board. Anyway there was a tripartite board. I forget who was on it. There was a guy named Elmer [Walker] something or other. (End of Side A, Tape One)

Q: Bert, can you talk a little bit about your international activities?

SEIDMAN: Well, I started to talk about them [earlier]. They began, as far as I was concerned, with the advisory group that went over at the time of the accession of the United States to the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade). Then not too long after that, there was an ILO regional conference in Havana around 1955 or 1956. I don't know [precisely when,] but around that time. I think it might have been 1956.

Q: Was this before the merger or after the merger.

SEIDMAN: After the merger. I should say that when the merger occurred Stanley Ruttenberg, who had been the CIO Research Director, was appointed by President Meany as the Director of Research of the AFL-CIO, and those of us who were in the AFL research

activity all went into his department, so I was under Stanley Ruttenberg. By the way, I don't remember exactly when this happened, but for a period of time I shared space with Ted Silvey. Anyway I continued in the trade field. I had been doing that for the AFL, and then I had the chief responsibility for trade in the AFL-CIO after the merger, and I also had a responsibility in the field of foreign aid. There was a publication that we used to put out that was similar to something the CIO had put out. I can't remember the names of those publications now, but anyway I used to write on trade and aid for them. I remember writing a whole treatise on trade for the AFL-CIO.

[Anyway], in 1956, there was a regional conference of the ILO in Havana, and they needed somebody in a hurry to be on a labor delegation, which was headed by Joe Keenan who was assisted by Serafino Romualdi. I forget who else was there. So Meany consulted Stanley and asked, “How about Bert going down?” Stanley hemmed and hawed. . . I realize that I am mixing up two things here. I'll get back to the. . . (End of Side B, Tape One)

Q: This is Jim Shea again and today is October 17, 1994. I am at the National Council of Senior Citizens, and once again picking up on my interview with my old friend Bert Seidman. Bert, could you tell me if you ever expected the AFL to merge with the CIO? Now we were both there at the time of the merger. I must say I was almost thunder struck when it came off.

SEIDMAN: No, I did expect it to occur sooner or later. I expected it to occur in part because of the relationship that developed between the AFL and the CIO during the period of the United Labor Policy Committee, which was [formed] during the Korean War. This was the policy group of the labor movement consisting of the AFL, the CIO, and some of the independents, the major one being the Machinists at the time, [who] were not in either group. [The Committee] developed a joint policy for the labor movement on economic matters and matters relating to labor relations and wage controls and things of that kind during that period. It came apart, and I don't remember the circumstances that led to its

coming apart, but whatever they were it seemed to me that that was the first step toward reestablishing unity, but because of the animosity between Green and Murray, there was no possibility of the merger taking place until they were off the scene. What actually happened was that in 1952, they died within a few months of each other, and as soon as Meany became the President of the AFL and Reuther became the President of the CIO and with [CIO General Counsel] Arthur Goldberg, I guess, playing a major role, they started to hold meetings which eventually led [to the merger]. At first it led to a no raiding agreement, as I recall, and eventually to the reuniting of the labor movement. Another factor involved in this, I think, was that the CIO had a committee — I don't remember what it was called. — which held what amounted to trials of the Communist dominated unions in the CIO, and many of them were expelled as a result those hearings. I think that also cleared the way for the eventual merger of the AFL and the CIO. So I guess my answer to you is that I don't think that I was flabbergasted by this [merger]. It was a gradual process. It didn't take place all at once, but I think the happenstance of the deaths of Green and Murray within a short time contributed to it. It's interesting that this is so, because Green and Murray were much less determined and dominating people than Reuther and Meany, and yet the necessary accommodation took place with those two very strong characters being the principal actors and being willing to make concessions. In the case of Reuther, it was an extremely large concession, because he gave up the Presidency of the CIO to become just a member of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO and the President of the new Industrial Union Department, which was set up at the time of the merger.

Q: You do recall that there were serious internal difficulties within the CIO between Dave McDonald and Walter Reuther, which I always felt was a factor too [in the merger].

SEIDMAN: I know that there was animosity between McDonald and Reuther, but I don't remember now exactly how that contributed to the merger.

Q: As I understood it, McDonald had been threatening to pull out of the CIO and join the AFL.

SEIDMAN: You may very well be right but I have no recollection of that.

Q: In any event it did come off and this of course will lead into [the subject of] your impressions of the individuals before and past, for example, John L. Lewis.

SEIDMAN: I have no first hand impressions of John L. Lewis at all. John L. Lewis gravitated between the AFL and an independent status and, of course, the CIO. I can't remember what he did. He supported [Wendell] Willkie. . .

Q: In 1940 he supported Willkie.

SEIDMAN: I know, but that is way back. I can't remember what he did or when he stopped being the President of the United Mine Workers. If you ask me questions about John L. Lewis, I haven't got very much to respond, because I don't remember very much about Lewis during that time. I remember only two events personally about Lewis. One I saw. The other at least was all around me. The first was the one where he and Meany. . . I was with the Workers' Defense League in 1947. I went out on behalf of the Workers' Defense League to the AFL Convention in San Francisco in 1947, where the issue was the non-Communist affidavit in the Taft-Hartley Act. There was a debate between Meany and Lewis, in which most people thought Meany got the better of Lewis.

Q: That was certainly a very significant debate.

SEIDMAN: It was a significant event in the labor movement, I think. So that is one occasion when I actually saw John L. Lewis. Of course I wasn't within ten feet of him, but I was in the hall when he was speaking and when Meany was speaking. The only other time, as I have already said, was this “we disaffiliate” business. The rest of it is pretty hazy in my mind. I never knew Lewis. I never had any direct contacts with him. I had some minor contacts with people at the Mine Workers [Union] at various times but not with Lewis.

Q: I recall reading the minutes of that convention. When Lewis advocated a general strike against Taft-Hartley, Meany said, "No, we are a democracy and we are going to work within the democratic [process].

SEIDMAN: Well, I was present then, but that's. . .

Q: I have been told by many, many people in the AFL-CIO that that really made Meany.

SEIDMAN: That's probably so, yes.

Q: And from then on his star was consistently rising.

SEIDMAN: Of course by that time he was Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL. He became Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL in 1939, so this was eight years later.

Q: Then let's move on to your impressions of Meany.

SEIDMAN: Well, my impressions of Meany were always very, very favorable. In the internecine controversies and animosities that existed in the AFL, Boris Shishkin and the people associated with him were on Meany's side, and Florence Thorne and I think some of the people in the Legislative Department were on Green's side. The top floor was the sixth floor and the fifth floor never talked with the sixth floor and all this kind of stuff.

Q: I recall that very well.

SEIDMAN: So I always had a very, very high impression of Meany, and I soon got to know that all the stereotypical descriptions of him in the press, on the radio, and later on television were way off the mark. He was a very smart man and a very shrewd man. He was always very, very sympathetic to me. He did some things which would have at times amazed those who had this completely incorrect impression of him. I think I described earlier how I came to be on the ILO delegation. [Actually, this was interrupted.] That was Meany. And of course he was a great reader and he had a vast fund of knowledge,

although he never had much of a formal education, and he had a very, very ready wit. He had some prejudices obviously. I guess in his day, they didn't call it that, but he would have been “anti-gay.” I don't know whether he would have been anti-gay today, but he was anti-gay then.

Q: No doubt about that!

SEIDMAN: But he was very, very strong on civil rights at a very early stage.

Q: Yes, I think he always got a bad rap on that.

SEIDMAN: I don't know whether he did get a bad rap, but no bad rap was deserved, I can assure you of that. He was very strong on civil rights, and he always had a very, very broad gauged view on public issues. Did I talk about the fact that when I took over Nelson Cruikshank's job one of the first things that I was doing was on welfare? What we now call “welfare,” they called then “public assistance.” Meany wanted the AFL-CIO to come out with a very strong position and we did. It was adopted by the Executive Council and of course he always took a very, very strong position on issues like national health insurance and foreign aid. Foreign aid was never popular. He was always very strong for foreign aid. He was very, very adamant and very, very strong in the way in which he handled the participation of the AFL-CIO in international bodies. There's no question about that. He would not brook what he saw as compromising fundamental principles including the anti-totalitarian, particularly anti-Communist, position that the AFL-CIO had and which he felt the European unions didn't share. So he had a lot of enemies, both at home and abroad, but I always had a very, very high respect for him. I was absolutely crestfallen when he died, and I will never forget the 1979 convention of the AFL-CIO, which was his last.

Q: He always had an anti-Communist stand, but he also had an anti-fascist [stand], particularly against Franco's Spain.

SEIDMAN: He was anti-totalitarian. He was against Pinochet. He was across the board for democracy and against totalitarianism in whatever form it took. (Pause)

Q: Bert, we are continuing with your impressions of Mr. Meany.

SEIDMAN: Let me just say that Mr. Meany had a great admiration, and it was a well deserved admiration, for Irving Brown. I don't denigrate what Irving Brown did on behalf of the labor movement over a long period of time, but Irving Brown was to my mind a very conceited person and very self-centered. He had no use for anybody who disagreed with him about anything.

Q: Are you telling me? (Laughter)

SEIDMAN: Well, I am telling you because you are the one who is interviewing me. (Fire alarm sound in the background.) Now what's going on? (Pause)

Q: Go ahead, Bert.

SEIDMAN: So anyway, I served for 14 years from 1958 to 1972 as Rudy Faupl's assistant in the ILO. I played a very, very active role during all that time. I wrote all his formal speeches; I served on the Resolutions Committee; and I went to the Governing Body meetings. When I lived in Paris and Geneva, I played an even more active role, and of course I got to know everybody in the international labor movement and the people at the ICFTU. I enjoyed that work very, very much. I was very much interested in it. Then in 1972 Rudy Faupl retired, and I was appointed by Mr. Meany as the Workers' Delegate [from the United States] and replaced Rudy Faupl as a worker member of the Governing Body. I continued to be very active in the ILO but now as head of the U.S. Worker Delegation and member of the Governing Body serving on a number of committees. Then sometime in early 1975, I was called up to Mr. Meany's office. I think Lane [Kirkland] was there. I can't remember whether Irving [Brown] was there or whether we were just talking about him. Anyway it was decided for some reason that I couldn't hold two jobs. I had been

holding those two jobs since 1966, but suddenly I couldn't hold the two jobs as Director of the Social Security Department along with being the AFL-CIO representative in the ILO, and they wanted me give up the ILO responsibility. I had no choice, and I did. I was very, very unhappy at the time, because I was very much interested in it. I was just getting to the point where I had enough seniority, so I would have played an even larger role in the ILO. I had always wanted, but was never given, the opportunity to play some role in the AFL-CIO's relationship with the ICFTU. I don't remember when we returned to the ICFTU now that I think about it. Also I had been on the Governing Body during the most difficult years, because they were the years that the AFL-CIO was outside of the ICFTU and I was participating in the ICFTU caucus. You can imagine how difficult that was at times [because the AFL-CIO] was attacking them and they nevertheless welcomed me into their caucus, and I continued to cooperate with them in the ILO.

So [losing the ILO responsibility] was a real disappointment to me. I have always had an interest in international labor affairs. When I went over in 1962 to live in Europe and to be what was called the European Economic Representative of the AFL-CIO, I always had the feeling that I wasn't being given enough responsibility, and I am sure that Irving Brown and Jay Lovestone (then Director of the AFL-CIO International Affairs Department) had a lot to do with that. The people that I dealt with in the European trade unions thought that that was a rather anomalous situation, because they thought that I was the only one, that I was the European representative. Why didn't I have the authority to be talking to them about things other than the ILO and economic issues? But I never was given that authority, and I always had the feeling that Irving and Jay — and I respected the role that both of them played in their lifetimes. I think they did a great deal. — but nevertheless I always had what I considered to be a very bad relationship with both of them. I had the feeling that they had a very, very poor regard for my capabilities and didn't trust my political views in part because they thought that Rudy Faupl was a little too conciliatory towards the European trade unionists although the European trade unionists [themselves] didn't think so, but Irving and Jay did, and Rudy never got along with them either.

So for whatever reason, I was divested of any international responsibilities and never got them again except in 1987 and 1988 when I found that unemployment insurance was going to be on the agenda for the ILO, and I first told Jim Baker [then AFL-CIO representative in Paris, who had the ILO responsibility] that I wanted to be on the delegation to deal with that issue. He arranged that, and then I told him, “If I am on the delegation, you can tell the ICFTU that I'll be glad to be the Chair of the Workers' Group in the committee dealing with unemployment insurance.” So for two years I was the Chair of the Workers' Group in that committee, but I didn't play any role on other matters in the conference that I used to deal with in earlier years. I had nothing to do with the political stuff, in which I had been very, very active in all those years that I had worked with Faupl and later when I myself was the ILO representative of the AFL-CIO.

Q: Bert, do you want to move on to your impressions of Walter Reuther?

SEIDMAN: Well, I don't have as high a regard for Walter Reuther as a lot of my friends do. At one time when I was a relatively young Socialist, and I guess he was a relatively young Socialist too, I thought that he was a wonderful person and was playing a wonderful role and so on and so forth. But when I got to know him when he was President of the CIO, and then especially in the AFL-CIO, I felt that he played a divisive role for the most part. He accepted merger because he thought he would succeed Meany as President of the AFL-CIO. I can't remember when he died.

Q: He died in an airplane crash in 1970.

SEIDMAN: 1970. Well, that was long before Kirkland became the [AFL-CIO President.]

Q: Yes, nine years before.

SEIDMAN: Nine years before Kirkland became the President. At any rate, I thought that Reuther played a divisive role over a long period of time. I don't know how he was to his own staff, but as far as I was concerned, I got to know just about all of the people in the

Executive Council very well. A succession of them. There were generations of them over the years that I was there, and I had a very good relationship with most of them. They were very, very nice to me, except Reuther. You would think that you weren't there. He would look straight through you. He never acknowledged that he ever knew me at all or knew who I was, and that also turned me off.

Q: Yes, I have interviewed a few people who worked for him. I was surprised to find out that he was a very difficult guy and had a tremendous ego. He would not brook people who disagreed with him.

SEIDMAN: I'll tell you. I never liked Walter; and I never liked Victor; but their brother Roy, the first one to die, I thought was a wonderful human being, and he is the one people know of the least. Of course, Alan Reuther, who is the Legislative Director of the U.A.W., is Roy's son.

Q: Oh. I wasn't aware of that. To wind up [the interview], can you give us your evaluation of the AFL-CIO now that you are retired and sitting back?

SEIDMAN: There are two things. The first is that the AFL-CIO, I think largely through no fault of the labor movement, has been going through an extremely difficult period and there seems to be no end to it. It makes it very, very difficult for the AFL-CIO to operate in any effective manner as long as the union membership as a percentage of the labor force continues to decline. There's less of a negative view now of the labor movement per se, but there is more of a negative view as to how important the labor movement is, and you can see that in various ways. One minor way was that there was no labor leader asked to say anything at all on any television program that I knew anything about — with perhaps the single exception of McNeil-Lehrer, and I can't even remember that — over the Labor Day weekend. It had always been traditional in the days of radio and then later in television that Labor Day was union's labor's day and that union leaders would speak over the Labor Day weekend. But that's only a minor aspect of it or evidence of it.

The second thing that bothers me is that too many young people who work for the labor movement, — especially at the national headquarters of the AFL-CIO and to some extent also the affiliates — and who come into responsible jobs now are very loyal and dedicated and hard-working as long as they are there, and they adhere very closely to the policies of the organization, but they really regard [their job] as a career stepping stone, and too many of them are perfectly willing to give it all up and go out and do something entirely different and sometimes even for organizations which are either unsympathetic or at least are far away from the basic tenets of the labor movement in the fields in which they are working. I think that is very, very unfortunate, because for one thing you have this constant turnover and you get people coming in all the time who have to learn about the labor movement, learn how you operate in the labor movement, become imbued with the principles of the labor movement, and when they have done all that, then they go off somewhere. In my generation, most people who went to work for the labor movement — Not all. I can think of some exceptions. — but a good many stayed and have stayed. They are the best people, people like Rudy Oswald, for example, or Dorothy Shields. These are people for whom the labor movement is their home. That's the institution to which they are attached. That's their life. And that's the way I felt about it all the years that I worked for the labor movement. I felt privileged to work for the labor movement. Sure, at times I envied the people who were in the policy positions or who went on to policy positions, but I never envied the people who went out and made more money by working for the government or some organization that had nothing to do with the labor movement, and I don't envy them now. I had somebody working for me, whom I hired, because I thought she was a very, very capable woman, and I still think she is a very, very capable woman, and at a very critical time she left to take on a high-paying job. Well, you know, more power to her, but it's the kind of thing that rubs me the wrong way.

Q: Okay, Bert, if you have any more thoughts [you want to include in this interview] give me a call and we can put them on tape. I would be glad to come down.

SEIDMAN: No, I don't.

Q: Thank you very much. Once again, it is a real pleasure.

SEIDMAN: Yes, well it's a pleasure for me, and especially to do the interview with you.

Q: Thank you, Bert.

End of interview